THE AMERICAN COMIC BOOK IS 60!

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the American comic book. It was in 1933 that Max Gaines got the idea to reprint the Sunday pages in a 36 page book. He sold the idea to Proctor and Gamble and **COMICS ON PARADE** was given away to customers. The idea was so successful that Gaines kept it up. He bounced from company to company for nearly twenty years before passing on in the late forties to leave his company to his son, William Maxwell Gaines. Bill got out of Bible Stories and into horror tales. Entertaining Comics [EC] made a big splash for about four years, then caved in to the Comics Code of 1954. The early comic books were filled with strip art and newspaper characters, but the success of the reprint books lead to regularly produced comic books. Most of the stories and art for these came from teenagers like Jerome Siegel and Joseph Schuster, a couple of Cleveland boys who came up with a variation on Philip Wylie's **Gladiator** which they called **Superman**. The success of the comic book as we know it today dates from June 1, 1938, when the first Superman story appeared in **Action Comics #1**. Batman followed in **Detective 27** [1939] and we were destined to follow the careers of a lot of weird superpeople out of the Great Depression and into the boom times that came with World War 2.

Aside from the appeal of a superhero to young boys sadly lacking muscles, Superman offered a lot of symbolic satisfaction to the adult male who suffered misery and deprivation in the Depression thirties. While regular folks died routinely in drive-by shootings committed by bootleggers like Al Capone, bullets bounced off the inflated chest of Superman. While many suffered poor vision as a result of malnutrition, Superman not only saw perfectly, his x-ray vision could see right through walls.

Well, Superman was an absurd character from day one, but his abilities appeal on many levels or he would not have survived any longer than many of his forties clones. Today's superheroes have carried absurdity further and further. Superman could appear almost normal with a blue suit and a pair of glasses, but characters like The Savage Dragon and the Cyber Force gang have left normality behind. All of the new generation of superheroes and villains are otherworldly. Oh, they spout contemporary jargon in their fumetti and there is a near normal moment here and there, but most of these beings and the comic worlds they inhabit are complete fantasy. Battles are constant and highly stylized. The artists cover up for lack of story with panels blown up to full page, even double page. Jack Kirby's best splashes used to make a dramatic point, but the technique has been trivialized through constant repetition and has become a blatant cliché in titles like **SPAWN** and **SHADOW HAWK**.

Where I used to *read* comic books as a kid, I *look* at them now, because there is little to read. Story is lost or obscured by art. There is little balance between the two. Characters are so overly embellished that any resemblance to human beings is lost. No one could actually walk around or function in the costumes drawn by Todd McFarlane and Mike Lee. I think these guys played with those Japanese robots that became popular in the seventies.

There may be stories buried under this obscure art, but what do they amount to? Vaguely rehashed movie scenarios? In the sixties, it was hip to invent band names like Mad River, Moby Grape, Sopwith Camel, The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, Jefferson Airplane, but nearly all of these bands played the same kind of music. Guitars and drums prevailed and the beat was somewhere between blues and rock. Today, the same trend is manifest in comics. It is now hip to rename superheroes, give them new costumes, and present them as something new. Indeed, there are companies called New Comics and Innovation, but renaming Captain America Superpatriot is just putting old wine in a new bottle. You can trot Sergeant Rock out wearing a tutu and he's still the same macho warrior fighting a war that ended decades ago.

The only thing really new in today's comics is the quality of the physical product. The covers are on heavier stock and the guts are printed on high quality book paper. The package looks good and comics have always sold on the basis of their garish covers. These books run from $1.95-$4.95 and the printers and publishers are making a bundle off all that glossy cardboard. Sure, the books will outlast the old ones run on newsprint, but what will the collector have? I find a lot of blatant dishonesty in these new books. Lots of promise but little delivery. Way too many pin-ups and ads. In one issue of **BRIGADE**, I counted 24 pages of art, which means 12 pages of ads, mostly in-house ads for other characters and their books. Of those 24 pages, there are far too many blown-up panels and splashes, few of them justified by the momentum of the story. Just as Marvel and DC began to cheat the reader and collector with the numbering system, independent studios and companies are following suit. They even resort to 0 issues to pad the income. To my knowledge, the first 0 issue in comic history was published by Robert Crumb. The only reason for this was his loss of the art for an early issue. When he got that art back from the editor of **YARROWSTALKS**, he had already published a couple of issues of **ZAP** with Don Donahue under the Apex Novelties logo. The Print Mint published the rediscovered art as **ZAP 0**. Why are we suddenly getting all these 0 issues? Why an **X-O Man of War O**? The reader buys a title in good faith, assuming it will continue only to find that the story he was following is now continued in another title so he is forced to buy that title. This is cheating as far as I am concerned. I resent it and I suspect other collectors do as well. I resent the constant renumbering, the manipulation of the reader market with phony mini-series. The "Death" of Superman was totally bullshit in my book. A rip off from word one. Manipulating colors and covers is just cheating the reader who likes to think he has a complete collection. When Jay Kennedy assembled the first edition of his *Underground and Newave Price Guide* back in 1983, he listed all of the colors of paper I had used to print some of the mini-comix in my series. I had to smile about that, because to me it was all xerox and whatever paper I had was used to print the next title that came in. I thought about getting one sheet of each shade at the copy shop [at least fifty different colors] and running a mini. This would mean that Jay, in order to have a complete collection, would have to buy the entire run of the minicomic. To me, it would have been a gag like the time I did a cherry, lemon, and lime issue of **COMIX WORLD** to go with Byron Werner's Coca-cola logo.

It's not a joke at Malibu and some of the other companies that are charging ridiculous prices for die-cut covers on repetitive superhero comics. In the 60th year of comic books, what has happened? I got 64 pages of comic stories for a dime as a kid. Today I get a third of that for $2.95. With all the advertising in contemporary comics, the prices should be lower, not higher.

-Clay Geerdes, 10/93

Kevin Brady, one of the original **PANDEMONIUM EXPRESS** gang who revived the spirit of individual comics and stimulated the new wave of minicomix, is back on the scene. He calls his outfit Mosquito Gulch Studio and you can write him at POB 104, Glencoe, CA 95232.

CLAY GEERDES **COMIX WAVE** 143
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ILLUS © TERRY LABAN. 1993.

BABY SUE Vol. 4, #2. $2.00 pp from POB 1111, Decatur, GA 30031-1111. In this issue, Sue reveals a darker side of Smokey the Bear. DZ.

J. R. Williams sent me the first issue of **I LIKE COMICS**, a new fanzine edited by Peter **HATE** Bagge. Interviews with folks like Jim Woodring, Julie Doucet, Dennis Eichhorn, Mary Fleener [who has a new **SLUTBURGER** out], and even some inside stuff on Crabbman, not to mention Gary Groth. $6 pp from Pat **BIG MOUTH** Moriarty, 6919 19th Ave. Seattle, WA 98117.

The Disney Company has altered some of the racist lyrics on **ALADDIN**, but the film is still unlikely to go down well in the Arab-American community. **TIME** [Nov. 9, 1992, p. 74 ff] ran a puff-piece on the film and didn't seem to notice either the sexism or the racism.

Chris Bors is back on the scene and you can get a copy of his **ANIMATION ALMANAC** for $1 pp. 121 Texas Lane, Ithaca, NY 14850.

Steve "Dog boy" Lafler is profiled in the latest issue of **CITY LIMITS GAZETTE**.

Please Write!
YOUR LETTERS ARE APPRECIATED!
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SAN FRANCISCO WEEKLY featured an article on Peter Bagge by Gary Wolf. V. XII, No. 27, pp. 10-11. The focus was on Bagge's **HATE** characters with some analysis and a few references to experiences from the recent **HATE/BALL** tour. Bagge's art was on the cover of **SFW**.

Those doing research on Valiant characters will want the **VALIANT READER**. Written by Anthony Bedard, the **READER** puts all of the Valiant characters into historical perspective. Now I know who **SHADOW MAN** is and what **HARBINGER** is all about, but I still fail to understand why the early issues are so expensive.

The tour book for Extreme Studios **TOUR '93** is an item historians will want to collect since it contains photos and bios on folks like Rob Liefeld. If you've seen the lines at recent cons, you know these guys are the wave of the future. Liefeld is the creator of **YOUNGBLOOD**, which appears under the image logo.

RABBITBOY 4 is $1 pp from Bruce Stengl, 633 King St., Apt. #13, Santa Rosa, CA 95404.

The panels scattered about this issue are reasons you ought to check out Terry Laban's **CUD**, one of the funniest satirical comics of the nineties. I loved Laban's primitive look at Archie.

CEREBUS 173 continues the MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS series.

From **THE JOE BOB REPORT** of September 6, 1993, I learn that the sequel to **EASY RIDER** is still in the wind. It should stay that way. I saw the original again recently and it did not have staying power for me. Sequels to thrillers like **LETHAL WEAPON** and **DIE HARD** are logical, even fun, because the stunt crew one-ups what they did and it's techno-crapola to the max, but **EASY RIDER** made its point and the main character was killed. You can get a **JOE BOB REPORT** of your very own for $3 from POB 2002, Dallas, TX 75221.

Robert Williams talks about how he got into **ZAP** and how he is now making the New York fine art scene with his fantasy paintings in **THE COMICS JOURNAL 161.**

... AND YOU'LL TAKE HOME 5 OF MY DADDY'S PIGS!
ULP! YOUR DADDY HAS THE BEST PIGS IN THE VILLAGE! O.K., VIOLETS BLOOMING-ONE HERO COMING UP!

TALES OF HELPLESS ANGER 1 is $3.75 pp from Tom Roberts, 333 S. East Ave., #209, Oak Park, IL 60302. The cover is by Jeff Siergey. A comic with a certain degree of social consciousness.